

Wood, Henrietta Rix. *Praising Girls: The Rhetoric of Young Women, 1895-1930*. Southern Illinois UP, 2016. 192 pages.

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A recent addition to the Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms series from Southern Illinois University Press, *Praising Girls* examines the epideictic discourse of several different groups of young women. Similarly to other writers in the series, Wood draws on archival sources, rhetorical and historical theories, and feminist rhetorical methodology to revise our understanding of epideictic rhetoric as a tool used by a diverse group of young women in the Kansas City, Missouri area during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Through an examination of archival sources, Wood calls for a broadened understanding of epideictic rhetoric, one that includes not only speeches given by elite male orators, but also those delivered in print by ordinary rhetors. Specifically, “ordinary girls who engaged in extraordinary rhetorical activities” (xi). These include affluent white girls, Native American girls, African American girls, and working- and middle-class white girls. Accordingly, “*Praising Girls* analyzes the published writing of diverse young women in a representative Midwestern city as epideictic discourse” (xi). Wood analyzes newspapers, literary magazines, and yearbooks to understand how these girls defined themselves and how they viewed and fit into the larger community of Kansas City in an era filled with social unrest and change.

Wood explains the significance of *Praising Girls* to feminist rhetorical studies with two reasons. First, while other scholars have examined the history of women and rhetoric, little attention has been given to young women and girls, and although chapters and articles address the rhetorical acts of young women, no book yet addresses this topic. Second, in order to understand the “rhetorical aims and achievements of women in the twentieth century, we need to understand their training and experiences as girls” (xi).

Wood uses the preface to explain the background of the project and its connections to interdisciplinary archival research, rhetorical theory, and feminist rhetorical methodology. Historians, archivists, and scholars will appreciate her explanation of the methods and methodology she has applied as well as the limitations she encountered. From an archival research perspective, Wood brings to light the messiness involved and is transparent about

the process and recursive nature of such research. She also clearly outlines a corresponding methodology, identifying parallels with Kirsch and Royster's feminist rhetorical practices and aligning key terms such as social circulation, strategic contemplation, critical imagination, and globalization with her study.

Organized into five chapters plus a preface and conclusion, the book addresses the epideictic nature of publications written by groups of girls in different school settings. The first chapter, "Girls and Rhetoric: Contexts," provides a framework for analyzing texts as epideictic rhetoric, specifically by considering how rhetoric supports group identity. Drawing on both historical definitions from Aristotle and Isocrates and contemporary interpretations of epideictic rhetoric from Kennedy, Miecznikowski Sheard, Poulakis, and Sullivan, Wood presents epideictic rhetoric as a force that defines collective identities, influences public perceptions of roles and rights, and alters a social order that excludes or dismisses (5). Further, she asserts that girls' writings can be epideictic. In examining these writings, Wood uses archival sources to answer the question, "Can epideictic rhetoric broach cultural and social boundaries?" (6). Wood also uses her first chapter to explain the importance of Kansas City as a rhetorical site for her study: this location serves her research particularly well because it contains archival sources for "affluent white girls, Native American girls, African American girls, and working- and middle-class white girls in a forty-mile radius" (xiv). While all of the girls in Wood's study "confronted constraints of gender and age," many of them also faced issues of race and class (6). Equally as important, the girls in the study witnessed and were affected by historical forces such as "industrialization, commercialization, imperialism, Jim Crow codes, and immigration," consequently, the epideictic rhetoric of these girls was informed by national, local, and international issues (17). In the face of these various issues, the girls' texts serve as examples of collaborative identity formation through which the writers helped to define their own collective identity and responded to normalized ideas about girls during the time period.

In the second chapter, "Amplifying Identity: Barstow 'New Girls,'" Wood describes how girls at Miss Barstow's School in Kansas City proclaimed their collective identity in *The Weather-cock* (the Barstow yearbook) via a demonstration of the five tactics of epideictic amplification (magnification, confirmation, emphasis, restatement, enlargement). Through publications in *The Weather-cock*, these white upper-class girls worked to distinguish themselves from earlier generations and identify themselves as "new girls" or middle-class girls that played sports, attended high school, liked to have fun, and "found venues for expression in school-sponsored publications" (23). For example, Barstow girls used emphasis, showing how "art can function as visual rhetoric that amplifies an epideictic argument," by including images that depicted their commitment to athletics and demonstrated that they took "learning to swim as seriously

as learning Latin" (42, 44). Such amplification techniques served to persuade readers of *The Weather-cock* of the girls' identity as new girls, different from earlier generations of upper-class women, including their mothers.

Chapter three, "Persuading Diverse Audiences: Haskell Girls," focuses on epideictic discourse published in two student newspapers at The Haskell Institute, "the second largest off-reservation government boarding school for Native Americans in the United States" (56). Publications in both the *Indian Leader* and *Indian Legends* newspapers addressed multiple audiences, both white and Native American, and worked to promote pride in indigenous identity. Even though their publications were ultimately solicited by white authority figures, the girls of Haskell appealed to diverse audiences in order to "reconcile skeptics, reassure sympathizers, and rouse support for Indian education rights" (58). Girls at Haskell also created identity through epideictic discourse by praising themselves and their peers and educating readers about Native Americans in the early twentieth century. Wood also considers similarities and differences between the rhetorical tactics used by girls at Haskell and those at Barstow. Both groups used similar epideictic strategies, but there were variations in how those strategies were applied. While Haskell girls privilege race over gender, girls at Barstow tended to take race for granted: "Haskell girls had to counter the notion that they are the Other, and Barstow girls define themselves by conjuring the Other" (87). These distinctions importantly allow for a broadened understanding of epideictic rhetoric.

The fourth chapter, "Glossing (over) Historical Realities: Lincoln Girls," examines the epideictic rhetorical activities of students at Lincoln High School, the only public secondary school for African Americans in Kansas City. Using their yearbook and newspaper, girls of Lincoln High wrote poetry and prose for the purpose of constructing community and combatting the racism that they experienced in a predominately white city. Although girls at Barstow and Haskell both faced challenges that shaped their epideictic rhetoric, girls at Lincoln faced particularly challenging circumstances, including addressing a primarily black audience that disagreed on how the race should progress. These challenges resulted in Lincoln girls using two epideictic strategies: one was to obscure the facts and the other was to emphasize them facts. One student, Hazel Hickum, illustrates the former strategy in a poetic tribute to Lincoln High School that "avoids addressing the historical consequences of separate and unequal education for African Americans" while instead imagining a community of young successful scholars (96). Such epideictic rhetoric at Lincoln High School allowed young women to challenge societal conventions while praising their peers.

In the fifth chapter, "Creating Consubstantiality: Central Girls," Wood discusses the students of Central High School, the largest coeducational high

school in the United States at the time. Through an examination of three school-sponsored publications, Wood examines the factions of the student body and their consubstantiality, an essential component to epideictic rhetoric. The girls of Central built consubstantiality to promote community and counter the factions within the school. Wood notes that while the boys at the school were more interested in creating school spirit by supporting the male athletic teams, the girls at Central composed epideictic rhetoric “that encouraged students to act together” (128). Even though the Haskell Institute and Lincoln High School were also coeducational, this chapter focuses on some of the distinct gendered differences between the girls and boys at Central High School. As with the other schools, the girls at Central used the school’s yearbook, literary magazine, and newspaper to promote inclusivity and wisdom. One student, Beatrice Hill, for example, composed a poem that personified the school and encouraged students to view the institution in a way that “bestows power, light, and knowledge of noble deeds upon its disciples” (130).

Using examples from each of the five chapters, Wood examines the similarities between each group’s epideictic rhetoric in the conclusion. She notes that the girls revised ideas about young women of the period and by defining themselves, helped define careers, goals, and objectives for women of the twentieth century. An example Wood provides is Lucile Bluford, who graduated first in her class of Lincoln High School, earned a bachelor’s degree at the University of Kansas, and joined and eventually became editor of the *Kansas City Call*. Wood suggests that, moving forward, scholars might use a framework of epideictic rhetoric to examine other textual and material artifacts from other cultures such as the first wave of the women’s movement, the labor movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. As a framework, epideictic rhetoric might provide ways to examine group identities “of other collectives past and present” (147). Wood also suggests that epideictic rhetoric might provide a way to understand recent political polarization and the failure of rhetors to “unite rather than divide the factions that constitute the United States.” This exploration, Wood proposes, “might yield rhetorical remedies to this serious problem” (148). In addition to addressing interdisciplinary archival work for historians and archivists in rhetoric, Wood’s inclusion of girls in the rhetorical conversation serves as an important reminder for a wide range of scholars of the importance of building on and moving beyond ancient rhetorical definitions to create a more inclusive, diverse field.

About the Author

Sara Austin is a doctoral student in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at Bowling Green State University. In addition to an interest in feminist rhetorics and archival research, her research seeks to explore teaching for transfer as feminist pedagogy.